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ABSTRACT

Educators commonly recommend that children born during the summer months, especially boys, be given an extra year to mature before entering kindergarten so that they will not suffer from the academic disadvantages of being among the youngest children in a class. Terms such as "academic red-shirting" and "graying of the kindergarten" have been invented to describe the practice and effects of holding children back from kindergarten. This Digest asserts that research cited in support of delayed entrance, however, is meager and somewhat contradictory. Results of a study comparing a group of summer-born children who delayed school entrance to a group who entered kindergarten on time (matched for intelligence) indicated that boys with summer birth dates tended to be advantaged academically by postponing entrance; the advantage was greatest in reading. The Digest asserts that such small-scale studies need to be replicated before educators can make informed recommendations about optimum kindergarten entrance age. The Digest notes that affluent parents tend to hold out their summer-born children more often than do low socioeconomic status parents, causing children at academic risk from poverty factors to face the additional hurdle of being compared to advantaged children who are 12 to 15 months older. The Digest concludes by noting that academic achievement is only one piece of the school entrance age puzzle, and that blanket recommendations to hold back one group of children only serve to change who will be part of the youngest group. The Digest recommends that educators and parents consider the individual child when making entrance age decisions. (EV)

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He Has a Summer Birthday: The Kindergarten Entrance Age Dilemma

Sandra Crosser

David would be 5 in July. Full of enthusiasm, he confidently underwent spring kindergarten screening. The school psychologist explained that David completed the screening with average and above-average skills, but he had a summer birthday and he was a male. The psychologist and the gym teacher agreed that David would be more successful in school if he were to postpone kindergarten for 1 year.

David's experience has been repeated over and over by many children across the country. Educators are commonly recommending that children born during the summer months be given an extra year to mature so that they will not suffer from the academic disadvantages of being among the youngest children in a class. Terms such as "academic red-shirting" and "graying of the kindergarten" have been invented to describe the practice and effects of holding children back from kindergarten (Bracey, 1989; Suro, 1992).

Small-scale studies of limited geographic areas suggest that delayed kindergarten entrance involves anywhere from 9% to 64% of the eligible kindergarten population (Meisels, 1992). However, data collected for the large-scale National Household Education Survey (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 1997) indicated that 9% of the first- and second-graders had been held back from kindergarten. Surveyed parents reported that children who had delayed kindergarten entrance 1 year were most likely to have been male (64%), white (73%), and born between July and December (70%). Compared to children born in the first quarter of the year, children born in the summer months were twice as likely to have delayed kindergarten entrance 1 year after they were first eligible.

Substantial numbers of parents and educators believe that children born in the summer months will gain an academic advantage if kindergarten entrance is delayed 1 year. Is it a disadvantage to be among the youngest, rather than the oldest, in a kindergarten class?

What Does the Research Reveal?

A review of the relevant literature reveals that few studies have been undertaken to examine whether or not children with summer birthdays do better academically when they postpone kindergarten entrance 1 year. Problems also arise because some of the research often cited in support of delayed entrance is poorly designed, has focused on children with learning disabilities or on early entrants, has relied on subjective parent or teacher reports, or has not looked specifically at children born during the summer months.

The related research is meager and somewhat contradictory. In general, studies indicate that the youngest children in a class may score slightly below the oldest children in a class, but any differences tend to be small and may be transitory (Morrison, Griffith, & Alberts, 1997; Cameron & Wilson, 1990; Kinard & Reinherz, 1986; Smith & Shepard, 1987; NCES, 1997).

The sparsity of evidence related specifically to summer-born children prompted an investigation comparing the academic achievement of two groups of children born in June, July, August, or September: those who entered kindergarten just after turning 5 and those who were held out 1 year and entered kindergarten at age 6 (Crosser, 1991). Each child who delayed entrance was matched with a child of like intelligence who had not delayed entrance. Boys were matched with boys, and girls with girls.

All of the children took standardized achievement tests during fifth or sixth grade. Those test scores were used to compare the achievement of summer-born, held-out children to that of summer-born children who had entered school on time.

Results of the study indicated that, given similar levels of intelligence, boys with summer birth dates tended to be advantaged academically by postponing kindergarten entrance 1 year. That advantage was greatest in the area of reading. Reading scores for females and math scores for both males and females did not show significant statistical differences.

Results of such small-scale studies need to be replicated before educators will be able to make informed recommendations about optimum kindergarten entrance age. There is no clear-cut evidence that delaying kindergarten for the youngest entrants will provide some magical academic advantage. Because there is so little entrance age evidence, and because some of that evidence is conflicting, there does not appear to be a strong academic basis for delaying kindergarten entrance for summer-born children.

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A responsible physician would not recommend any treatment that had not been scientifically tested and retested for effectiveness. She would need to know the specific symptoms for which the treatment was effective. She would need to know the success rate of the treatment and what complicating side effects and interactions were possible before prescribing the treatment.

Responsible educators also have a need to know the facts before recommending treatment for a child whose only symptoms are being born in July and being male. Nevertheless, the reality is that both teachers and parents are accepting the idea that delaying school entrance for summer birth date children is sound practice.

How Does Holding Out Affect the Kindergarten Experience?

It has been reported that affluent parents tend to hold out their summer-born children more often than do low socioeconomic status parents (Meisels, 1992). If that is the case, then children who may be at academic risk from factors associated with poverty face the additional hurdle of being compared to advantaged children who are 12 to 15 months older. We should expect that the economically disadvantaged children may be outperformed by their classmates who are both chronologically and developmentally their seniors.

In the real-life kindergarten classroom, the youngest children may appear to be immature and unready to tackle the tasks that their significantly older classmates find challenging and intriguing. As the curriculum and academic expectations increase to meet the needs of the 6-year-old children, there is a real danger that the kindergarten program will become developmentally inappropriate for the very young children it is meant to serve.

Did David's Parents Make the Right Decision?

David is 15 now. When he was 13, he towered above his classmates as he walked through the halls. The school desks just didn't fit his 6'3" body, and many of his teachers assumed that he must have been retained since he was older than the other students. When asked what grade he is in, David always makes it a point to explain that he started kindergarten late.

But David is well liked by students and teachers. He moved into both puberty and formal operational thought sooner than his classmates, earning their admiration. Academically, David does average and above-average work with minimal effort.

Did David's parents make the right decision in holding him out from kindergarten? They don't know. They will probably never know, but David thinks he knows the answer.

Conclusion

Academic achievement is only one piece of the school entrance age puzzle. The child's physical, social, and emotional development are key pieces, as well. It would seem to be the course of wisdom to consider the whole child in all of his or her aspects when making decisions about school entrance. The answers are not simple. They are further complicated because each child is different biologically and emotionally. Each child brings his own special characteristics with him as he lives and works through his unique life experiences.

The counsel of educators can bring about life-changing events in a young child's world. Blanket recommendations to hold back one group of children only serve to change who will be part of the youngest group. As educators, we must resist the urge to follow the unfounded advice of those who would recommend uniform practices that would exclude any group of children from our schools. Educators must consider the individual child as we continue to build a stronger knowledge base upon which to make entrance age decisions.

For More Information

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